

COMUNICADO DE PRENSA



Hon. Aníbal Acevedo Vilá

Comisionado Residente y Miembro del Congreso

Sirviendo a Puerto Rico

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aníbal Acevedo Vilá".

An Open Letter to the Editor of National Geographic Magazine from Puerto Rico's Representative in Congress and Secretary of Economic Development and Commerce

The following letter to the editor of National Geographic Magazine was issued in response to an article published in the magazine's March 2003 issue. Information is available at the end of this statement on how to access online excerpts from the article, send your own letter to the editor or participate in National Geographic's online forum.

March 7, 2003

Mr. William L. Allen
Editor in Chief
National Geographic Society
P.O. Box 98199
Washington, D.C. 20090-8199

Dear Mr. Allen:

National Geographic's recent article ["True Colors", March 2003, Andrew Cockburn] was a departure from your long tradition of balanced and educational reporting showcasing the full breadth and depth of the world's various cultures and countries. We were outraged by the unbalanced and poorly researched story which depicted an extremely unfair and biased representation of Puerto Rico and its four million hardworking, educated citizens.

Writer Andrew Cockburn failed to present an accurate picture of Puerto Rico's true social, cultural and economic composition. Puerto Rico is home to the best-educated, most stable democratic society with one of strongest socioeconomic standings and highest standards of living in all of Latin America. The Island's strong middle class, vibrant and diverse economy and outstanding educational and research facilities make Puerto Rico one of the world's most important centers for international business and home to over half of the Fortune 100.

But of greatest concern is the writer's near total oversight of Puerto Rico's most widespread cultural traditions. By choosing to showcase extremely limited examples of our culture to the near total exclusion of traditions much more representative of the general Puerto Rican society, National Geographic's readers receive an extremely distorted picture.

For example, you showcase a practitioner of santeria, an exotic religion practiced by merely one percent of the population, while completely ignoring the historical and cultural influences of Catholicism and other Christian religions, practiced by well over 85 percent of the population. Similarly, while you briefly mention our cherished bomba and plena musical traditions, there is no reference at all to the full variety of historical and cultural influences which gave birth to our broad spectrum of cultural accomplishments including such world-renown painters as Jose Campeche and Francisco Rodon, violinist Pablo Casals and the poet Jose de Diego.

In addition to our strong culture, Puerto Rico also boasts a dynamic business community that is inextricably linked with and mutually beneficial for the United States. As the U.S.'s eighth largest trading partner and the world's fourth largest purchaser of U.S. goods per capita, Puerto Rico purchases more products than many larger countries such as Italy, Russia or China. In 2001 alone, Puerto Rico purchased \$16 billion worth of U.S. goods, fueling the creation and maintenance of over 270,000 U.S. mainland jobs.

Puerto Rico's economy is fed by our internationally-regarded educational and research facilities which produce over 22,000 university graduates per year. Puerto Rico is the number one producer of Hispanic engineering graduates in the nation, making the Island a prime recruiting stop for America's leading corporations. Fifty-three of the Fortune 100 companies now utilize Puerto Rico's productive and committed workforce, preferring to do business in Puerto Rico because we adhere to all of the United States' environmental, wage and safety regulatory standards.

This mutually beneficial relationship extends far beyond business. And our unique relationship with the United States is not an example of "divided loyalties" - as you entitled the article - but of a common agenda and a shared belief in the basic ideals of democracy, freedom and justice. Which is why over 90 percent of Puerto Ricans support some form of a permanent union with the United States. Puerto Ricans have long embraced these basic ideals and nearly 200,000 have fought or died to defend them in every American conflict since World War I. Puerto Rican men and women have been a noteworthy presence in the U.S. armed forces and continue to support the U.S. as a major component of today's military and as first responders in national crises such as the 9/11 attack in New York City.

Our dedication to a permanent union with the United States is evidenced by our commitment to the Commonwealth relationship, which is the only status option that provides Puerto Rico with essential economic development tools

that enable the Island to grow while preserving our culture, self-governance and a permanent commitment to American democracy.

In three separate referendums over a thirty year period, Puerto Ricans have voted to preserve this Commonwealth relationship. The ongoing debate on status demonstrates our commitment to free and open expression not, as your article implies, anti-American sentiment or a desire for independence. Our unique relationship means that we can be proud of our culture and at the same time proud of our permanent union with the United States.

Puerto Rico has made significant gains in the last 50 years of our union with the U.S., but like any developed society there is always room for improvement and the Calderón Administration is taking this charge head-on. By supporting specific economic incentives, we have dedicated ourselves to promoting investment that creates and retains jobs. We have been successful in fighting corruption by implementing Governor Calderón's zero-tolerance policies, mandatory Code of Ethics, external government agency audits and proposed campaign finance reform legislation. And Governor Calderón has taken our strong tradition of social justice to new levels by committing \$1 billion to the Special Communities program which improves infrastructure and living conditions for the Island's neediest communities.

It is our hope that future reports about Puerto Rico will better capture the essence of a culture shared by the four million Puerto Ricans on the Island and 3.5 million Puerto Ricans spread across the U.S. The unbreakable ties between our communities underscore our shared commitment to the principles of justice, equality and democracy that will continue to ensure the success of the longstanding relationship between the United States and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,

Aníbal Acevedo-Vilá
Resident Commissioner of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico
Member, United States Congress

Milton Segarra
Secretary of Economic Development & Commerce
The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico